

March 9, 2009

Education Committee Public Hearing

Dear Education Committee:

**Subject: Open Choice (S.B. 830)**

Good Afternoon and my apologies for not being able to attend today's public hearing. My name is Sylena Ellison. I am the Open Choice Program Support Specialist for the Farmington Valley. In particular, I am assigned to Simsbury, Avon, Farmington and Granby. I was hired by the districts one year ago to provide support for over 200 Open Choice students and their families. Although I am not an employee of the Connecticut Regional Education Council's Open Choice Office, I work closely with each member of the office for support on certain issues as they arise.

I quickly learned the importance of the Open Choice office upon the start of my position last March. As I set up meetings and made phone calls to parents and staff to introduce myself, I noticed that just about every person had a relationship with someone in the Open Choice office. In a few instances there were individuals who were a little apprehensive about working with someone new. In my opinion, relationships with Open Choice students and their families are critical. Each and every staff member of the Open Choice office has built bonds with people over time that if broken, may be damaging. I believe most people see the Open Choice office as a team of individuals that are there to not only enroll students in the program but help with the journey once they are placed in their Suburban districts.

The Intervention Specialists meet regularly to discuss cases and assist each other with troubling or difficult situations by coming up with strategies as a team to move forward. They've accompanied me on challenging home visits, parent meetings and team meetings. The office has also provided me with resources for my students and families. For instance, many of my students benefit from the Student Support Center & Summer program offered by the Open Choice office. Others have been connected to counseling and community services that they may not have been otherwise aware of prior to conversations with an Intervention Specialist.

The Open Choice office has also created forums for students and/or parents to come together to discuss their concerns. They've also provided opportunities for students to attend educational trips that they may not have otherwise been able to attend. Clearly the office has served as a bridge between families/students and the suburban schools. Parents feel comfortable knowing that they can reach out to the office for support. School systems have also felt comfortable knowing they can contact the office for guidance and referrals in situations that they may not be able to handle by themselves.

In closing, the Open Choice office is not just a space with desks and computers but a team of individuals who care about Hartford students and their families. The importance of their existence is evident to the many people they have reached. I can testify that this office has helped me tremendously in my current position. Through their connections, I have further assisted families with guidance and services. Eliminating this team may be the equivalent to burning a bridge for Open Choice students and families. Each of their positions is imperative to the smooth operation of an agency striving for the same goal.....Integration.

Cordially,

Sylena Ellison

Open Choice Program Support Specialist  
Simsbury Public Schools